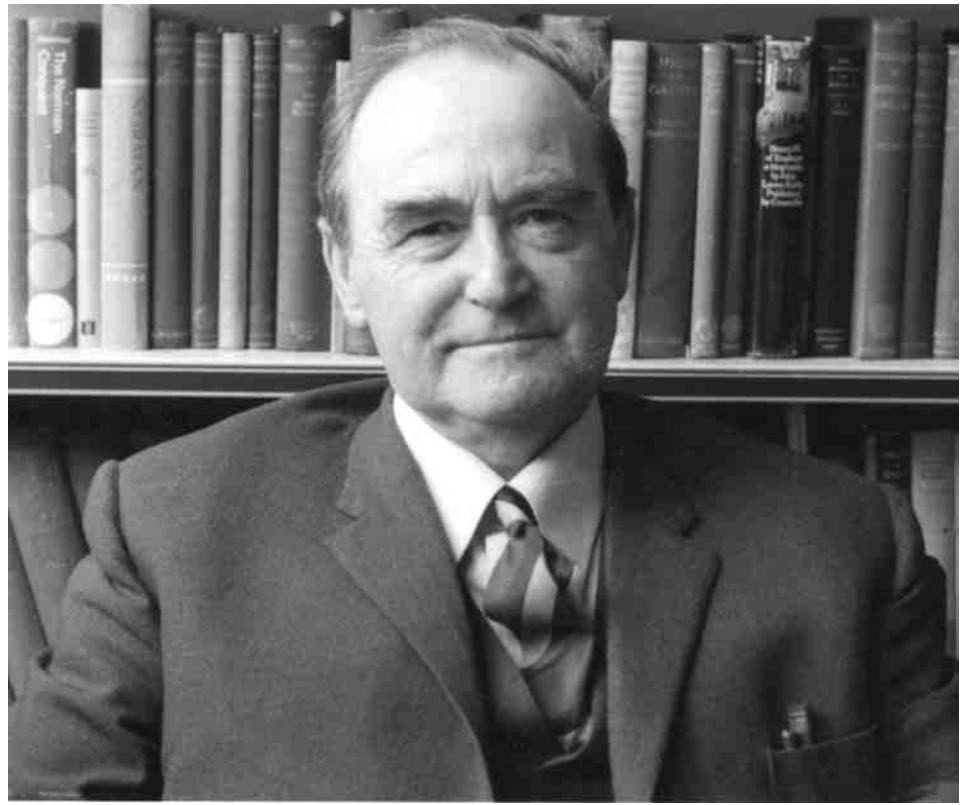

JOHN ROSKELL

John Smith Roskell
1913–1998

JOHN ROSKELL'S lifetime work on the medieval English parliament had the consistency of direction and solidity of judgement that were characteristic of his personality. Respectful of the long tradition of scholarship in this field, he defended a broadly neo-Stubbsian view of parliament against the revisionists, while making a more critical and balanced assessment of the role of the Commons in what his mentor, J. G. Edwards, termed 'The Second Century' of its history, after 1377. He brought to his work an unrivalled familiarity with the text of the parliament rolls, carefully scrutinising language and context to establish the development of the procedures and powers of the House of Commons. In parallel with this he constructed from the biographies of the members, a picture of its composition and social and political background. Through this twin track approach he sought to define the role of parliament in a political society led and ruled by the king and aristocracy. His insistence on never going a step beyond the evidence, his profound distrust of speculation, and the down-to-earth commonsense of his Lancashire stock, gave his conclusions a solidity that commanded assent. He steered to successful completion the official history of *The House of Commons, 1386–1421*, which bears the imprint of his approach.

John Smith Roskell was born on 2 July 1913 at Norden, near Rochdale, where initially both his parents worked in the cotton mills. His father, John Edmund, had some musical talent and was also organist at St Paul's Church. After serving in the First World War, he became a piano teacher and cinema organist in the Rochdale area. John Smith attended

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the Norden village school, from which he won a county council scholarship to Rochdale municipal secondary school which he attended from 1924 to 1929. It meant a twice daily journey by tram into Rochdale, the wearing of shoes rather than clogs, and learning first French then Latin. After morning assembly one day, Dr Henry Brierley, secretary of the Lancashire Parish Register Society, addressed the boys on the origins of their surnames. 'Roskell', he explained, came from Hrosketel, reflecting the Norse immigration of the tenth century along the river Wyre into the area of Amounderness. To the attentive ear of the young John it was one among other experiences which fed his awakening interest in history. This was manifest when he gained distinctions in History, French and Latin in the school certificate examination. At that point the family moved to Clayton-le-Moors and John transferred to the nearby Accrington Grammar School where he sat the entrance examination for Manchester University. Interviewed by E. F. Jacob, he was awarded the Jones scholarship for two years, to the value of £40 per annum, commencing at Michaelmas 1930. The Manchester history school bore the distinguished imprint of T. F. Tout and James Tait (who was still an honorary professor), with Jacob as the current holder of the medieval chair. Lewis Namier arrived in 1931 but there is no indication that either his recently published work or his personality made an impression on Roskell at this point. It was the captivating lectures of W. A. Pantin which provided his baptism into medieval history and Jacob who confirmed him as a late medievalist through the special subject on the Conciliar Movement and Henry V, taken in his third year. Supported by an internal scholarship, he achieved a first class in 1933 and embarked on an MA thesis on 'The Knights of the Shire for the County Palatine of Lancashire, 1377–1460'.

Meanwhile, however, the family's fortunes had worsened. The advent of the 'talkies' made cinema organists redundant except for playing the programme in; orchestras were disbanded, forcing his father to take a series of small time commercial jobs. Eventually he secured appointment as cinema organist in Douglas (Isle of Man) to which the family moved in 1937. As a student, young Roskell commuted daily into Manchester by bus from Clayton-le-Moors until in January 1933 he secured accommodation in St Anselm Hall, a Church of England residential hall for students, affiliated to the university. It was the beginning of a lifelong attachment. Having completed his MA thesis (examined by Jacob and Tait) in 1934, he was awarded the Langton fellowship, valued at £200 per annum, to fund his doctoral research at Balliol College, Oxford where V. H. Galbraith was a fellow. For an indigenous Lancastrian, Oxford was

an alien and not wholly welcoming or congenial world. But with Galbraith he established an immediate rapport. Writing to C. R. Cheney after their first meeting he reported that 'I like Galbraith immensely; for one thing he doesn't speak so differently from myself, as most people do up here.'[1] Later he wrote that Galbraith 'did my soul a power of good'. They met together once a week for a lunch at the Balliol buttery consisting of a Cornish pasty, a banana, and coffee, to discuss the 'finds' which he had made in his research. His confidence in his work grew, and he also integrated himself into the life of the college, playing in the second soccer eleven and rowing fifth oar in the second college eight. He began exploring the Oxfordshire countryside, with brass rubbing expeditions. But he lived frugally—'as near to the bone as possible'—even to the extent of cycling down to Oxford from Clayton-le-Moors every term, a two day journey. Out of the total £600 received from his Langton fellowship he thereby saved £120 to pay for his sister Jessie's training as a teacher.

From his Master's thesis, Roskell conceived the idea of investigating the composition of a single parliament, to obtain a snapshot picture of the range and diversity of its members and their contribution to its work. He chose that of 1422 because the complete returns were available and he was already familiar with the political background. In fact the parliament was untypical in two respects. Called to establish the form of government in the crisis after Henry V's premature death, it commanded the attendance of a higher proportion than usual of the military and political elite among the gentry, while for the same reason its preoccupation with weighty matters of state left little room for the more habitual concerns of the lower house. Nevertheless its exceptional importance and abundant documentation ensured that there emerged a substantial thesis. In 1937 Galbraith left Oxford for Edinburgh and John Roskell returned to Manchester to write up his thesis, again taking up residence at Anselm Hall, first as a tutor and then (in 1939–40) as sub-warden. In 1937 his MA thesis had been published as a volume in the Chetham society, setting a new standard for the composition of biographies of MPs.[2] On the strength of these achievements he was appointed an assistant lecturer when in 1938 Bertie Wilkinson moved to the chair of medieval history at Toronto. The story of the young Roskell's emergence from the industrial working class, through the encouragement of local teachers, the support

[1] Letter dated 15 Oct. 1935 from Balliol College.

[2] *The Knights of the Shire for the County Palatine of Lancaster, 1377–1460*, Chetham Society, NS, 96 (1937).

of county and university scholarships, and the ultimate patronage of the leading scholars in the subject, to follow his bent as a medieval historian was characteristic of the inter-war years. His own steady determination, self-discipline, and loyalty to his family were one element; the civic university recruiting the ablest members of the local working population and providing an intellectual training noted for its rigour and firmly empirical content was the other. By 1939 Roskell could look back in the knowledge that 'it had all worked out in the end'. In fact, of course, his world was soon to be transformed and further work on medieval history postponed *sine die*.

On 25 July 1940 John Roskell joined the Royal Navy in which he was to serve for the next five years. Here his Norse ancestry found fulfilment. He soon proved himself a natural seafarer, spending most of the war at sea, principally on smaller ships. Having been broken in as an ordinary seaman, he joined HMS *Rodney* as midshipman, and then became sub-lieutenant RNVR responsible for depth charges on HMT *Ronaldsay*, an Isles class minesweeping trawler based on Scapa Flow. When subsequently she moved to Gibraltar to form part of the task force for the 'Operation Torch' landings on the north African coast, Roskell was gunnery officer and claimed at least one straffing enemy aircraft. In December 1943 he was appointed first lieutenant on HMS *Dumbarton Castle*, a corvette then under construction on the river Tay and subsequently engaged on convoy duties and U-boat hunting on the Clyde–Gibraltar run. Roskell's wholehearted engagement in naval warfare left a lasting impression on him, surfacing in later years in his conversation and in his emphasis on duty and respect when he was again exercising authority as a departmental professor. In two brief interludes ashore he appeared in rating's rig before K. B. McFarlane and M. McKisack at Oxford for his D.Phil. viva in January 1941, and as a commissioned officer in August 1942 for his marriage to Evelyn Liddle, likewise a Manchester graduate, at Nelson parish church. On his demobilisation they set up house in Bury and 'JS' (as he now came to be known) returned to the university as a full lecturer.

He now had to read himself back into the subject from which he had been completely divorced for five years. For teaching he resumed his old stint though, following the departure of Jacob to Oxford, he shifted the special subject back to Richard II and the Great Schism. More work would be needed to prepare his thesis for publication, and he set himself to extend his knowledge of parliament by a systematic reading of *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, 'page by page, column by column'. During the inter-war

years distinguished work on the medieval parliament had been published by a number of scholars working in the neo-Stubbsian tradition and mainly exploring the nature of representation and the electoral process in the period before 1400. However this had also come under fire from two flanks. The powerful scholarship of H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles was deployed to disparage the role of the Commons and to suggest that they were subservient to the Lords, while Tudor historians led by A. F. Pollard and J. E. Neale were claiming that only in their own century did 'parliament become a political force with which the crown and government had to reckon' as the Commons 'became the centre of parliamentary gravity'. In writing up his thesis into a book, Roskell felt bound to counter these claims. He mounted a twin-track defence of the independence and importance of the medieval House of Commons through detailed biographies of its members and a close scrutiny of its records. From the former he sought to demonstrate the political stature of those elected; from the latter the true significance of their parliamentary activity.

The Commons in the Parliament of 1422 was completed in 1952 and published two years later.[3] It begins with chapters on the procedures for elections in the counties and boroughs and an analysis of the parliamentary experience of those elected. Although the normal carry over in succeeding parliaments was only one in five, the average number of parliaments attended by the knights of the shires in 1422 was six, and as many as two-thirds had previous parliamentary experience, while their collective experience went back a quarter of a century. Thus, despite its transient existence a medieval House of Commons exhibited a continuous political identity and a collective will. Continuity among the borough members was less marked, but here Roskell was able to show that the influx of outsiders into the smaller borough seats had begun in the reign of Henry VI, half a century earlier than had been claimed, and that many of these were lawyers, officials, and members of the royal household with working connections to the political class. The Commons were, in fact, a rather more homogeneous body, representative of the middle strata of society, than their different categories suggested. Roskell had thus constructed the first profile of a medieval House of Commons, concluding that there was nothing to suggest that either within or outside parliament such men of affairs were the tools of the Lords. If, in this conclusion, he

[3] *The Commons in the Parliament of 1422: English Society and Parliamentary Representation under the Lancastrians*, Studies Presented to the International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions, 14 (Manchester, 1954).

was endorsing the argument of McFarlane's two articles on 'Bastard Feudalism', this was reinforced by the lengthy biographical notes which comprised almost half the book. Roskell saw the representative principle as being at the very heart of parliament's purpose and unique authority. He readily acknowledged the pre-eminence of the nobility in government, but his demonstration that over the whole medieval period rarely more than half the peers attended parliament confirmed him in the view that the Lords were essentially summoned to meet the elected representatives of the realm.[4] In the circumstances of 1422, however, it fell to the Lords to assert that, in the absence of an effective king, the exercise of royal authority was vested in them, meeting in parliament or council, a doctrine to which the Commons assented. This countered the claim of Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, to exercise a regency under the terms of Henry V's will and codicil. When Roskell wrote, the text of this was missing, and its subsequent discovery vindicated his deductions about its terms in all points save the dating of the codicil.[5]

Although the book itself was not published until 1954, the preliminary articles had established Roskell as the leading exponent of the medieval English parliament in the post-war generation. In 1948 he was asked to become secretary of the British section of The International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions in succession to Helen Cam, a post which took him to the quinquennial congresses at Paris (1950), Rome (1955), and Stockholm (1960). In 1949 he delivered a paper at the Anglo-American Historical Conference on 'The Medieval Speakers for the Commons in Parliament'.[6] The immediate post-war years were fruitful not only in his developing scholarship but in his teaching. Despite the fact that the number of students had doubled (but more on the science than the arts side), the university to which Roskell returned in 1945 did not differ greatly from that he had known in the 1930s. Long periods of English and European history were taught through twice-weekly lecture courses which filled the mornings, supplemented by shared essay classes once a week. Special subjects in the third year were largely the preserve of the professors, who not only ruled supreme in their departments but controlled the Senate,

[4] 'The Problem of the Attendance of the Lords in Medieval Parliaments', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 29 (1956).

[5] 'The Office and Dignity of Protector of England, with Special Reference to its Origins', *English Historical Review*, 68 (1953).

[6] 'Medieval Speakers for the Commons in Parliament', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 23 (1950).

leaving faculty boards with little role. It was 'a strongly hierarchical institution' in a very traditional mould. Most of the professors and senior administrators were Manchester men, with less than a handful of women. 'Austere, utilitarian, and overcrowded', the university was nonetheless entirely congenial to the young Roskell, to whom the 'bronchitic subclimate', the soot black architecture, and the surrounding streets of one-up, one-down, back-to-back houses familiar to Engels, made it seem home from home. He got on well with Christopher Cheney, Jacob's successor, and found the returned war veterans, serious and committed men, kindred spirits and perhaps easier to relate to than the new influx of Oxbridge lecturers. But this post-war phase had come to an end by 1952, when the average age and the overall numbers of students had both dropped and the first of the new universities at Keele, with new educational ideals and new course structures, was beginning to break the mould.[7]

At this point Jacob urged Roskell to apply for the newly established chair of medieval history at Nottingham. It had not been in his mind, for he was happily established at Manchester, with his young family, his book completed and further research mapped out, and few administrative responsibilities. He was well known to both the assessors, D. C. Douglas and J. G. Edwards, but nevertheless was both surprised and a little disconcerted to be offered the post. Here too the syllabus was traditional. As professor he taught the outline course in English history to 1485, along with Stubbs, *Select Charters*, and a special subject. His sole assistant, J. C. Holt, was assigned the outline course in European history but was able to lay claim to a special subject of his own on the reign of King John. Roskell quickly adapted to the more informal atmosphere in a smaller, but very lively, department, appreciating the daily exchange of ideas over coffee and the opportunity to develop broader theses at meetings of a staff history society. It was here that 'Perspectives in Parliamentary History' had its origin. Manchester had retained the entrance requirement for historians of Latin at O-level, but despite his efforts Roskell could not get that accepted at Nottingham. He worked hard and successfully to establish a strong medieval department, though research graduates were few. Outside the department he proved an effective administrator, becoming chairman of the library committee and taking his turn as Dean of the Faculty of Arts. He subjected the papers for Senate meetings to the same

[7] B. Pullan with Michele Abendstern, *A History of the University of Manchester, 1951–73* (Manchester, 2000), pp. 1–31.

scrutiny as Stubbs, *Select Charters*, and came to be respected for his plain speaking and tenacity in upholding principles. Though insisting on his status, he could relax with his students taking them on brass rubbing expeditions to Strelley and other churches. He and his family found Nottingham congenial and eventually a wrench to leave when, in 1962, he was invited to return to Manchester to succeed J. M. Wallace-Hadrill. Roskell himself was temperamentally averse to making career moves and was principally moved to accept by the strong sense of obligation to his Alma Mater which had nurtured his early career and by a sense of homecoming to his native region.[8]

Despite the increased administrative burden at Nottingham Roskell pressed ahead with the study of the Speakers of the Commons, outlined in his earlier lecture and article. It was while at Nottingham that he began to compile and publish in the relevant local history journals a series of biographies of Speakers. These were full length studies of their public careers, detailing their connections, offices, military and political service, and rewards, drawing mainly on printed sources and selected PRO records. Twenty-six such articles had appeared by 1963, covering twenty-nine individuals.[9] These formed the extensive groundwork for the book published in1965.[10] It might have been expected that from these Roskell would have framed a profile of the kind of men who were elected Speaker, and he did indeed emphasise that they were pre-eminently chosen for their familiarity with rulers and government. But the more evidence he gathered of their personal connections, the more cautious he became of adducing political motivation from it. He felt on firmer ground in discussing the origins of the Speaker's office, the nature of his protestation, the circumstances of his election, and the scant evidence of his work. On a close scrutiny of the parliament rolls he concluded that Sir Peter de la Mare probably was the first to hold the office *eo nomine* in 1377; that his ritual protestation on taking office defined his responsibility as the mouthpiece of the Commons and did not assert freedom of speech; that the ambiguous evidence of his election points at different times to both the Commons' freedom of choice and the Crown's influence; and that he

[8] For this paragraph I am indebted to communications from J. C. Holt, H. G. Koenigsberger, and D. Welland.

[9] Subsequently collected and republished in *Parliament and Politics in Late Medieval England*, vols. 2 and 3 (London, 1981, 1983).

[10] *The Commons and their Speakers in English Parliaments, 1376–1523*, Studies Presented to the International Commission for the History of Representative and Parliamentary Institutions, 27 (Manchester, 1965).

acted as a chairman, in ordering debates and perhaps directing them to meet the agenda of the Crown. The first part of the book provides a masterly evaluation of the evidence on these problems to yield a definitive account of the early Speakership, as reflecting the corporate identity of the Commons. Here again the theme of the Commons' independence of mind was demonstrated through a convergence of individual biographies and institutional forms. The second and longer part seeks to place each Speaker in the context of his parliament(s) in a chronological narrative. In his introduction Roskell evinced some unease about the extent of the circumstantial detail in this, and it must be said that it adds relatively little to the preceding discussion on either the men or the office.

If it was a 'strong sense of filial destiny' that led Roskell to return to Manchester, the move brought less a fulfilment than a frustration of his pedagogic ideals. He remained staunchly loyal to the standards and methods of his own training in handling evidence and drawing conclusions, namely through a close study of texts and the formulation of a precisely articulated argument. For him the study of history was an end in itself: it lifted a curtain on a corner of the past, without any claim to illuminate or influence the present. His method and purpose did not match the mood of moral assertion and radical innovation of the years 1968–72. These were difficult years for Roskell, and there were several factors in the situation which made his position increasingly isolated and embattled. In 1965 Manchester University, though rapidly expanding to meet the post-war baby boom, was still largely governed by those, like Roskell, whom it had nurtured. At lecturer level there was an unusually large turn over, as numbers of those who had joined in the 1950s and now had books to their credit, moved back to Oxbridge or to the new universities. There were 250 resignations from the university in the session 1965–6 alone. At the same time there was a large influx of junior lecturers who had no attachment to the Manchester tradition and, frustrated with the hierarchical structures, tended to sympathise with the student programme of 'a community of learning'. All this made it difficult to bridge the gap, in age and outlook, between a traditionalist professoriate and student radicals. Student radicalism came to a head in 1968–70 with the occupation of Whitworth Hall and the administrative offices, boycotts of lectures, and verbal attacks on the Vice-Chancellor. There were demands for representation at all levels of university government and for the reshaping of teaching methods and syllabi. While these evoked some sympathy from the junior lecturers, Roskell as the senior professor in the department set himself firmly against all change to the structure and content of teaching.

Such inflexible conservatism at a time of rapid and challenging change in English universities exasperated some of his junior colleagues, the more so as he ruled the department in the traditional mode of Jacob and Cheney. Not surprisingly, he could not carry his colleagues with him nor stop the changes that ineluctably took place, the one he most deplored and fought hardest being the abolition of the Latin entrance requirement. With it went the obligatory paper on Stubbs, *Select Charters*. With the barriers down, medieval history began to lose its prestige and pre-eminence at Manchester, where it had been strongest. While authoritarian and rigidly opposed to the democratising tendencies in the department, his relations with 'his' lecturers were paternalistic and he was genuinely concerned for their well-being. Similarly, although out of tune with his students' radicalism, he exhibited an avuncular and personal interest in them as individuals. The primacy he accorded to disciplined learning and exactitude of expression won him their respect and gratitude. He was generous of his time, ready to repeat a whole special subject session for the benefit of a student who had missed it by attending a boycott. His insistence on correct grammar and syntax was appreciated, if only in retrospect. His special subject on Henry V attracted a small number of takers of high quality, some of whom became professional historians. He had enormous pride in the history department. Although he lectured formally in a suit and gown, he was not remote. With a genial manner and a humorous twinkle beneath the bushy eyebrows, he could relax in students' company, though quick to suppress any presumption or affront to the dignity of himself or others in authority. His transparent honesty, decency, and kindness helped to ease relations with those who disagreed with what he stood for.[11]

In the years that followed Roskell for the most part devoted himself, within the university, to his department and subject. He was a prime mover in establishing the Honours School of Medieval Studies in 1966 and his great love of books made him an ideal chairman of the library committee and of that of the University Press. He worked closely with the dynamic new University Librarian, Frederick Ratcliffe, to effect the merger of the John Rylands Library into the university. By the time the revised university charter and statutes came into effect early in 1973 most of the radicalism had disappeared. It provided enlarged lecturer representation on the main university bodies while at subject level the new

[11] For this paragraph I have drawn on Pullan with Abendstern, *University of Manchester, 1951–73*, chs. 5–10 and communications from I. Kershaw and R. G. Davies.

departmental boards were intent on exercising real influence. There 'debates were conducted with passion and votes were often taken' and in practice the professors usually accepted the verdict. However the student dream (shared by some of the younger lecturers) of flattening the hierarchy and creating a commonwealth of equality had faded. Academics wanted decent salaries, assured promotion, and regular sabbatical leave: the last only confirmed in 1977 as one year in ten.[12] Roskell never had any until the very last term of his tenure of the chair, when he had to spend part of the time in hospital.

He had celebrated his return to Manchester with a notable lecture in the John Rylands Library which put into perspective the development of parliament's control of government up to the reigns of the later Stuarts.[13] Acknowledging that parliament was, in origin, an instrument of the Crown, he countered the assertions of H. G. Richardson and G. O. Sayles that its primary function was judicial and that the Commons were generally subservient to the Lords, adducing the necessity of their assent to taxation and legislation, and the status and experience of their leading members. He equally challenged the claim by Tudor historians that parliament only achieved its place in the constitution through being made a partner in government under Henry VIII, when the House of Commons became the centre of parliamentary gravity. Taking a longer perspective, Roskell asked whether such views did not misplace the frontier between the medieval and modern constitution—between parliament as an occasional and extraordinary event ancillary to government and parliament as an indispensable and permanent part of government. Only in the latter condition could it exercise effective control over government. Reviewing in turn a series of criteria—parliament's right of regular assembly and control over its dissolution; the Commons' right to freedom of speech; their ability to control the crown's ministers; their authority to legislate, and to grant and control the spending of taxes—he argued that in all these matters the great divide came in the latter seventeenth century. It was then that 'the Crown lost the power to govern effectively without parliament'. 'Only then does parliament move into a significantly new phase of its history: the constitution of the *ancien régime* is now really at an end'. The conflicts of Crown and parliament in the late medieval and early Stuart periods, like its partnership with the Tudors were episodes in

[12] Pullan with Abendstern, *University of Manchester, 1951–73*, chs. 11–13; eid., *A History of the University of Manchester, 1973–90* (Manchester, 2004), pp. 36, 53–67.

[13] 'Perspectives in English Parliamentary History', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 46 (1964), 448–75.

building up its potentiality. 'Perspectives in Parliamentary History' was among the most effective of John Roskell's writings. While untypically broad in scope and combative in theme, it eschewed polemic and developed its argument lucidly, in detail, and with compelling force. He also, on his return to Manchester, took up the problem of the authorship and character of the *Gesta Henrici Quinti*. With the collaboration of Frank Taylor on the text, and the benefit of a journey to Normandy to retrace the route of Henry V's march, their joint conclusions appeared in a double article in 1971, followed by a fully annotated edition with introduction in 1975. From a careful and critical evaluation of the *Gesta*'s subject matter, Roskell convincingly argued that it was an original and skilful piece of propaganda, composed in the winter and spring of 1416–17 to support the English position at the Council of Constance and the alliance with the Emperor Sigismund. While disallowing the current attribution of authorship to Thomas Elmham, Roskell found insufficient evidence to suggest any other royal chaplain.[14]

In the last decade of his tenure of the chair Roskell served on a number of extramural bodies in which he found considerable fulfilment. He greatly appreciated being elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1968, as much for the credit it brought to Manchester as to himself, and he assiduously attended the biannual section meetings. In Manchester he served on two bodies customarily associated with holders of the medieval chair. One was the presidency of the Lancashire Parish Register Society which he held from 1962 until 1984. Although professionally he had limited knowledge of parish registers and how they were being exploited by demographic historians, his academic standing and his enthusiasm for the publication of primary sources for Lancashire history were highly valued by the society. So was his methodical and unhurried conduct of its council and annual general meetings, 'slowly, properly, and very traditionally'.[15] He also, in 1972, succeeded Jacob as president of the Chetham Society, on the council of which he had served since 1950. With the cooperation of his colleague W. H. Chaloner as reader and editor, it was a period of remarkable vigour in publications, with volumes appearing in all but two of the years from 1965–85. Rising production costs led to a crisis in 1981–2 but by the time Roskell resigned in 1984 the society's finances had been put on even keel. Closely allied to this was his position

[14] 'The Authorship and Purpose of the *Gesta Henrici Quinti*', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 53 (1970–1), 54 (1971–2); J. S. Roskell and F. Taylor (eds.), *Gesta Henrici Quinti* (Oxford, 1975).

[15] Letter of Dr C. D. Rogers, 18 Nov. 2002.

as Feoffee of Chetham's Hospital and Library in succession to Wallace-Hadrill in 1963. He knew the library well, having studied there in the 1930s, and on the resignation of Gordon Rupp in 1967 he became chairman of its library committee. The Library, with its valuable rare book collection, was a semi-autonomous part of the Hospital founded by Humphrey Chetham (d. 1653) which was now an academically modest secondary school. Their relative position was confusing: there were two trusts with separate endowments managed by one board of twenty-four governors drawn from the university and the city. Here too Roskell conducted business slowly and systematically, ensuring that the proprieties were strictly observed. But in 1980 he was caught up in a controversy which reached national proportions. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the finances of both institutions declined and plans were made for converting the Hospital, the wealthier of the two, into a specialist co-educational music school, for which new boarding facilities would have to be provided. This placed in jeopardy the rare book holdings as the largest realisable asset. Roskell strove to convince the Feoffees that the Library should be treated on an equal footing with the school; that its historic contribution to the cultural and scholarly life of the North-West must be maintained, and that the preservation of its holdings and buildings should be their top priority. Throughout the 1970s he secured annual grants from the university and city and compiled an historical statement for the Feoffees of their obligation under Chetham's will. But by 1979 the Library's deficit had risen to £11,000, and the decision was taken to sell a considerable number of the books at auction, mainly in the fields of cartography and illustrated works of medicine and natural history including some Arabic and Near Eastern manuscripts. The sale in November 1980 generated expressions of outrage in the national press and the resignation of one of the Feoffees.[16] The public criticism distressed Roskell, who was comforted by the support of his predecessor C. R. Cheney, but he had ensured that the Library's main holdings in the history and topography of the North-West remained intact, and the substantial sum raised (£600,000) enabled the Library and School to be put on a sound financial footing. The Library was transformed from a mere museum into a valuable working asset for scholars and on his retirement in 1990 he received public and private tributes to his achievement. His work for Chetham's Library gave him more pleasure and satisfaction than any other, for it

[16] Minutes of the meeting of the Feoffees, 23 Nov. 1990; Roskell's unpublished historical résumé for the Feoffees; letter from B. Pullan to Roskell 30 Nov. 1990.

evoked his strongest qualities, of integrity and determination, and his deepest convictions, of fidelity to a founder's intentions and to the history of the North-West.

He was likewise devoted to, and much enjoyed, his membership of St Anselm Hall, which had been integrated with the university in 1956. On his return to Manchester, he was appointed chairman of the Hall committee, where 'he was an attentive but un-interfering backstop to several wardens', sustaining their authority and guiding the committee with skill and wisdom in practical matters of finance and building. He cherished the ethos of the Hall as a single sex community, resisting attempts to make it solely a freshers' residence. Here student radicalism was comparatively muted, and Roskell, often accompanied by Evelyn, was welcomed as a regular attender at aularian occasions, such as plays, concerts, and old members' reunions.[17]

His relaxations were wholly in character. Foremost was his lifelong passion for cricket which he had played regularly as a schoolboy and student. On moving to Nottingham he joined the staff cricket club, as a middle order batsman. Usually a slow scorer, taking time to play himself in and scoring ones and twos rather than boundaries, he could be relied on to maintain one end through long periods. He also specialised in fielding in the deep near the square leg boundary, being particularly skilful in judging balls hit high and placing himself to catch them in two cupped hands. After returning to Manchester he ceased to play, but would umpire. Above all he loved watching the game, at Trent Bridge and Old Trafford, taking his lunch bag and binoculars, watching the match ball by ball, and keeping a score card. Not for him drinking in the pavilion; cricket was accorded the same respect and attentive scrutiny that he gave the parliament rolls. His gastronomic preferences were simple and traditional: a pork pie and pasty, or Lancashire black puddings and black peas, were favourites, washed down with a Guinness or bitter; he never touched spirits. John Roskell was essentially a homely and family man, taking the children to his parents at Douglas and later Fleetwood in the 1950s, and in the 1970s joining the family of his pre-war friend from St Anselm Hall, Charles Tremlett, on the Lleyn peninsula.[18]

When Roskell retired in 1979 the university put on record its recognition of his loyal service. The encomium spoke of his pride, combined with humility, in having been raised in the great medieval scholarly tradition of

[17] Obituary by R. G. Davies in *The St Anselm Hall Newsletter*.
[18] Information supplied by Edmund Roskell.

this university which he had notably sustained; of his being warm-hearted, generous, and staunchly reliable as a colleague; consistently devoted to the welfare of the university and his own students; a Lancastrian and Mancunian through and through. As he once remarked of Manchester, 'It's a large and dirty city, but I love it and it's home'.[19] His retirement was also marked by a volume of essays in his honour by fellow medievalists, edited by his colleagues R. G. Davies and J. H. Denton. The essays comprise a sustained review of the development of the English parliament throughout the middle ages, illuminating Roskell's own formulation of its 'participation in government at the sovereign's command'.

In the 1980s Roskell took up two academic projects which had occupied him persistently if intermittently over the last two decades. One was a detailed investigation of the articles of impeachment brought against Michael de la Pole, earl of Suffolk, in the parliament of 1386. Despite the fact that de la Pole was convicted of three of the seven charges, most historians had dismissed these as 'paltry', 'trivial', and 'frivolous'. Roskell sought to explain why the Commons were outraged at de la Pole's self-enrichment as chancellor and his cavalier treatment of undertakings given in the previous parliament. The book begins by establishing the context: the failures and frustrations of the war with France, the taxation granted for it, and the confusion and corruption in government that produced the Commons' demand for reforms. Richard II's refusal to implement these and his assertion that ministers were solely answerable to himself reflected a 'scheme for government by personal prerogative' which the impeachment was designed to challenge. Roskell then proceeded to a detailed consideration of the charges, dividing them into those on the dereliction of his duty as chancellor and those alleging peculation in that office. To the first, focusing on the failure to implement the reform ordinance of 1385 and the mishandling of the relief of Ghent, de la Pole pleaded that he shared responsibility with other royal councillors, the Commons responding that this did not exculpate him as chancellor. The second set of charges gave instances of how he had used his office for personal profit under royal favour and protection. Roskell examined in detail the honours and grants which de la Pole had received, concluding that, though these were technically defensible, 'royal partiality could hardly have gone further' in bending the rules. Roskell's demonstration of the thorough knowledge displayed by the Commons about de la Pole's affairs and the workings of the royal administration underlined his claim

[19] Resolution passed at the meetings of Senate and Council on 2 Oct. 1979 and 3 Jan. 1980.

that they were informed and independent critics, though he did not broach the wider question of what support they might have received from his enemies among the nobility or from within the government. On these questions, in a characteristic footnote, he declined to go a step beyond the evidence.[20] The unremitting concentration on the substance of the allegations makes demanding reading, for here as elsewhere Roskell was determined that the reader should be made aware, not only of the evidence for his conclusions, but of its limitations, and precisely what he had and had not established. If the book may be thought too narrowly focused, it is a superlative example of his investigative method and scholarly integrity.

The project that filled the major part of John Roskell's retirement was the volume in *The History of Parliament* covering the period 1386–1421. While he was still at Nottingham he had been asked—probably at the suggestion of J. G. Edwards—to undertake the section for 1377–1422. Launched in 1951, the *History* bore the imprint of Namier's belief that the key to politics lay in personalities, patronage, and connections, and that the determinant influences were local and personal rather than national and ideological. It was thus envisaged as primarily a register of the Commons, to be compiled by teams of scholars working over an extended period, together with 'an outline of its principal transactions'. That accorded well with Roskell's already well practised biographical approach, and his belief that 'the workings of any institution . . . are conditioned by the nature of those who take part in what it does'. The Trustees thought that a medieval section could be completed in five years; Roskell considered that it would take at least ten. In the event it took almost forty. With this in mind he encouraged research students at Nottingham and Manchester to do MA theses on particular shires, though never having more than two at a time. This meant that progress was slow, and in 1966 the Editorial Board (of which he was not a member) proposed shortening the period by starting in 1386; that would reduce the number of biographies by 3,000. Against his better judgement, and under the threat of the section being terminated, Roskell concurred, but it rendered useless a large number of biographies already completed for the earlier years. Even then it was an uphill struggle to get completed work from a series of temporary researchers and only after the appointment of two 'dedicated and energetic collaborators', Dr Linda Clark and Dr

[20] *The Impeachment of Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, in 1386 in the Context of the Reign of Richard II* (Manchester, 1984), p. 154, n. 111.

Carole Rawcliffe, on a permanent basis in 1975 was steady progress maintained.

The biographies and constituency surveys which they compiled in Tavistock Square were sent up to Manchester for his approval. He would read them carefully, crossing out and interlineating, and then go over all his corrections with them on his visits to London. Every statement had to be substantiated: 'I do insist on being presented with all the facts.' The biographies returned 'stamped with his inimitable style, with clauses and sub clauses, and a distinctive syntax, peppered with such expressions as the forenoon'. Yet as time passed inflexibility softened to dry humour. 'I am well aware' he once remarked to Carole Rawcliffe, a perceptible twinkle evident below the daunting eyebrows, 'that you disregard my amendments, and even find them ponderous [pause for effect], but I need you to know that I read every word.' He was ever paternalistic and avuncular towards his female research assistants of another world and generation, interested in them as persons as well as professional scholars, while maintaining formal decorum even over the cup of tea and clouds of tobacco smoke with which sessions ended.[21]

The volumes of the *History* already published for later periods had attracted criticism for being almost exclusively biographical. Roskell therefore resolved to use his retirement to write an extended introduction which would present the functioning of parliament as an institution. Into this he poured the accumulated knowledge and reflection of a lifetime, rapidly becoming absorbed in a task which 'once started I could not stop'. Describing it as 'a conducted tour of *Rotuli Parliamentorum*', which he had at his fingertips, he dealt, in turn, with the evidence for the composition of both houses, electoral practice, the judicial, petitioning, consultative, and taxing functions of parliament, the ordering of its business (*regimen parliamenti*), and the rights of its members. It is not only an impressive *tour de force* but a model of meticulous scholarship, precise reading, and judicious interpretation. Roskell finished the introduction at Easter 1988 and the four volumes were published in 1992.[22] At the launch party, appropriately held at the Speaker's House early in 1993, he was delighted to be welcomed in the cross-Pennine accent of the current Speaker, Betty Boothroyd. *The House of Commons, 1386–1421* was not only the crowning achievement of fifty-five years research into the

[21] C. Rawcliffe and L. Clark, 'A Personal Memoir of the Making of *The House of Commons, 1386–1422*', *Parliamentary History*, 17 pt. 3 (1998), 297–300.

[22] J. S. Roskell, Linda Clark and Carole Rawcliffe (eds.), *The History of Parliament. The House of Commons, 1386–1421*, 4 vols. (Stroud, 1992).

history of the medieval parliament but the culmination of a scholarly tradition reaching back to William Stubbs of which John Roskell was a proud and unashamed exponent.

He was deeply bereaved by the death of his wife, Evelyn, in 1989, after which he wrote nothing apart from an autobiographical memoir. He died in hospital at Stockport on 1 May 1998.

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